How the Tehran Paperbacks Got Here

The wolf eats him who makes himself a lamb.
— Bartolemeo Vanzetti

Bartolemeo Vanzetti's adage has become a motto for journalist/activist William Worthy, 60, who has made it his business for a quarter-century to tread where others dare not, particularly in those areas where the American government would prefer to see less, rather than more, press coverage.

When the government searched the luggage of Worthy and two colleagues last month and seized paperback books published in Iran, complete with reprints of classified U.S. documents taken from the U.S. Embassy there, it was not Worthy's first confrontation with the government.

On Christmas Eve, 1956, Worthy, on leave as a Neiman fellow at Harvard, slipped across a bridge from Hong Kong to communist China, ignoring a U.S. ban on travel.

According to later testimony, his shortwave reports from Peking for CBS conflicted with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's position that communism in China was a passing phase whose demise would be hastened by refusing to recognize the government of Mao Tse-tung. The State Department asked CBS and the newspapers for whom Worthy was reporting to bring Worthy home. Although CBS relayed the request, Worthy ignored it and stayed for six weeks.

When Worthy did return, the State Department refused to renew his passport without a commitment that he would abide by the travel restrictions in the future. Although Worthy was defended by a coalition of scholars and journalists during a series of congressional hearings, the denial of the passport was upheld by an appellate court.

In October, 1960, six months before the long-delayed Bay of Pigs invasion, Worthy reported from Havana that Cuban officials expected to be attacked by Cuban exiles supported by the United States. Later in 1960, a second showing of "Yanki, No!", a television documentary about Fidel Castro's Cuba on which Worthy worked, was canceled under pressure from the State Department.

In October, 1961, Worthy returned from his fourth trip to Cuba, where he had reported that the Castro government was not unpopular and failing as described by the Kennedy administration. Still without the passport the government had refused to renew in 1957, he was tried and sentenced to jail.

In 1964, his conviction was overturned by a federal appeals court that declared the travel restrictions unconstitutional, Worthy was traveling without a passport through North Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia.

In February, 1980, Worthy, then a professor of journalism and Afro-American studies at Boston University, and Randy Goodman, now a visiting lecturer at the University of Lowell, Mass., accompanied a 46-member U.S. "grassroots" delegation to Iran. At the time, although there was no ban on travel to Iran, the State Department was doing nothing to encourage travel there.

In September, 1981, with equipment and expense money from CBS television, Worthy, Goodman and sound technician Terry Taylor returned to Iran on 10-day visas. Extending their visas over six weeks, they managed to conduct more than 70 interviews with Iranians ranging from the clerical heirarchy to shoppers on the street.

At an airport on their way to Shiraz, they purchased sets of the paperback books they had heard described by militants at the embassy. They purchased additional books at a downtown Tehran bookstore.

When the three left Iran on Nov. 27, 1981, they shipped the books with their regular luggage in two batches on Luftansa airline.

Customs officials regularly single out items from Iran for special drug searches, according to Lufthansa agent Jack Boylan. When they saw a batch of paperback books, several of which have reproductions of classified documents on their covers, they decided to call in the FBI. The FBI confiscated the documents.

But the second batch of books had not been inspected by Customs when it arrived in New York City, so the journalists had another copy of the volumes, which form the basis for these reports.

— *Scott Armstrong*